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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Walter Reed Gardens, known today as the Commons of Arlington, is a small-scale garden apartment complex constructed in Arlington County, Virginia, in 1948. The garden apartment design is significant for its role in providing a new type of housing for residents within Arlington County. The design of the garden apartment complex and its relationship to the surrounding landscape represented a distinctly mid-20th-century idea of multi-residential living. The small mass, low height and moderate density of the four building clusters set in a landscaped environment separated them from more urban forms of the property type. Walter Reed Gardens was designed to allow several buildings to be grouped in a pleasing aesthetic plan intended to provide a more hospitable and healthier life for the occupants.

Walter Reed Gardens is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under criterion C in the area of community planning and development as a fine example of the small-scale garden apartment complexes constructed in Arlington County, Virginia, before and directly after World War II. The Colonial Revival style and open court design of the development is characteristic of the garden apartment complexes funded by FHA-insured mortgages. Walter Reed Gardens is an excellent example of the garden apartment complex as described in the Multiple Property Nomination, *Garden Apartments, Apartment Houses and Apartment Complexes in Arlington County, Virginia: 1934-1954*.

The eighteen buildings of Walter Reed Gardens are contributing to the historic district. The non-historic in-ground swimming pool is non-contributing.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Arlington County during the first half of the 20th Century

During the early 1900s, increased dependability on area streetcars allowed residents of Arlington to work in the District of Columbia and thus, the County began to be marketed as a commuter suburb. Developers and real estate agencies advertised that the County allowed both conveniences to Washington, D.C. and a healthy, bucolic setting for family life. The 1907 publication, *A Brief History of Alexandria County*, touted the advantages of Arlington's proximity to Washington, D.C.:

A person living in Alexandria County [now Arlington County] enjoys, free of cost, all the Government institutions of Washington city, its libraries, its colleges, schools, museums, art galleries, and public buildings and at the same time enjoys the health of country life and escapes all the discomforts of a crowded city.¹

Between World War I and World War II (1917-1945), Arlington County developed a strong identity of its own. Owing to confusion between the City and County of Alexandria, the Virginia General Assembly voted in 1920 to change the name of Alexandria County to Arlington County. The boundaries of the newly named county were challenged when the community of Clarendon attempted to incorporate as a town in 1920. This action was defeated when the courts ruled that Arlington County was "a 'continuous, contiguous, and homogeneous community' that could not be subdivided for the purposes of incorporating a part of it."² Thus, Arlington County began self-government as a single unit without subdivisions.

Beginning in 1920, when the population was just 16,040, Arlington County began to grow at an intense rate as a suburb of Washington, D.C. This compelled the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia to redistrict the area, giving Arlington County its own delegates in the state's House of Delegates in 1924 and a state senator by 1944. In 1929, the City of

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Alexandria had annexed another portion of land from southern Arlington County that included the coveted Potomac Yards. Consequently, a special provision was introduced in 1932 preventing further annexation between the City of Alexandria and Arlington County. In 1965, the formal boundaries of Arlington County were established, comprising an area of 25.7 square miles.³

Arlington County's evolution from a commuter suburb to an important employment center in its own right continued through the latter half of the 20th century. By the 1990s, apartment dwellers outnumbered those in single-family houses and almost all of the land in Arlington had been developed, much of it consisting of numerous areas where multi-family dwellings dominate. Although no longer rural, Arlington County remains a continuous, contiguous and homogeneous suburban community, with an economy that reflects a key federal presence and a steadily expanding roster of national association and corporations. Arlington has evolved into a thoroughly urban area and part of the core of the Washington Metropolitan Area.

Walter Reed Gardens and Apartment Development In Arlington, Virginia: 1934-1954

While the population of Washington, D.C. and its suburbs increased dramatically in the years prior to World War I, it increased tremendously after the war. The first increase in population in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area was attributed to the tripling of the federal work force between 1916 and 1918. The 1920 census reveals that for the first time, the majority of Americans lived in urban and suburban settings, with the suburban population growing at a much quicker rate.⁴ The stock market crash of 1929 suppressed the extensive building rate that had occurred in Washington, D.C. during the early 1920s. By 1934-1935, the construction of new housing units, specifically apartment buildings, was attributed to the influx of new federal workers under Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs. Arlington County, whose rural landscape would soon be an image from the past, became one of the fastest developing counties in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.⁵ The extensive housing shortage in Washington, D.C. led to the construction of approximately one hundred seventy-six (176) new apartment

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buildings or complexes in Arlington County between 1934 and 1954. These new apartment buildings and complexes included both small and large developments.

The construction of garden apartments in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area reached a peak in the mid-1930s and early 1940s. In Arlington County, local officials and the federal government wanted to avoid the construction of sub-standard, large-scale developments that would dissolve into slums after the housing emergency eased. Thus, one of the focuses of apartment developments between 1934 and 1954 was the need to construct affordable, attractive and permanent housing. Cost efficiency was continuously emphasized in the construction process, especially for projects backed by the Federal Housing Administration.

Many of the residents who relocated to Arlington during this period were employed under the New Deal programs of the 1930s. The number of Arlington residents continued to grow, with the population reaching 26,615 residents in 1930. This number was more than doubled ten years later with a total of 57,040 residents in 1940. Of those employed in 1940, more than 40% were involved with the government on a local, state, or federal basis. These workers, who made up the largest group of families and individuals in need of rental housing, spurred the government to become involved in housing developments. "Increased rentals for...apartment units... coming in the wake of the largest federal payrolls since the World War [I], were the primary reason for the great revival of...building. Thousands of new employees of the New Deal agencies rapidly took up the slack in residential space, causing rentals to increase 25 percent and more."⁶ The Federal Housing Administration (FHA), established in 1934, became the primary mortgage insurers for thousands of residential projects, both single-family and multiple dwellings, throughout the United States. Between 1934 and 1940, the FHA insured mortgages on 240 rental projects throughout the country and 200 of them were garden apartment projects.⁷ The FHA's involvement in Arlington County directly impacted a number of apartment complexes that would be constructed in the county between 1934-1954. Arlington County's location along the banks of the Potomac River across from Washington, D.C. attracted a number of developers with FHA-insured mortgages to construct these large-scale housing projects. Where the FHA was not directly involved, they influenced the designs and layouts of hundreds of complexes and

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individual apartments being built in Arlington County. The dramatic increase in population during the 1930s-1940s and the limited availability of affordable rental housing for the middle-class government worker made the County a prime development area.

Federal Housing Administration and Its Influence on Garden Apartment Complex Developments in Arlington County, Virginia

Prior to the establishment of the Federal Housing Administration, the United States government generally avoided any involvement in the mortgage-lending business. The collapse of the stock market in 1929 and the subsequent foreclosures on thousands of properties by mortgage lenders led to the increasing demand for government assistance. The Federal Home Loan Bank Act of 1932 had set up a home loan banking system that “authorized to make advances to member home financing institutions secured by first mortgages.”⁸ This act was the first of a number of attempts by the Hoover administration to address the concerns of the homeowner and mortgage lending communities. The election of Franklin Roosevelt and the continuing devastation of the housing situation led the new administration to focus a number of new laws on these issues, particularly the establishment of the National Recovery Act of 1933. This act “authorized the use of Federal funds through the Public Works Administration to finance low-cost and slum clearance housing and subsistence homesteads.”⁹ These actions, although not the cure all that the American people hoped it to be, were the building blocks that led to the National Housing Act of 1934 (NHA) and the establishment of the Federal Housing Administration.

It was through the enactment of the National Housing Act that funding was available for many of the apartment projects in Arlington County. The first commitment by the FHA to insure a mortgage under the NHA on a low-cost housing project was Gustave Ring’s Colonial Village at Wilson Boulevard and North Taft Street (1935, 1939, 1954-1955), in Arlington County. Colonial Village became a model for FHA-assisted rental apartment complexes throughout the United States. Colonial Village, when the three phases were completed by 1955, provided 974 rental units. The success of Colonial Village spurred the construction of other garden apartment complexes based on its design and ideals. Colonial Village was listed on the National Register

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of Historic Places in 1980 in recognition of its contribution to the garden apartment movement and the influence of the Federal Housing Administration on the rental housing developments in the 1930s.

Amendments to the National Housing Act were passed in 1938 and again in 1939, spurring increased use of FHA-backed financing for projects in Arlington County and across the United States. Arlington Village in Columbia Heights was the second large rental housing development constructed by Gustave Ring in Arlington County. The site of Arlington Village, like Colonial Village, was an undeveloped, sloping site located along a major thoroughfare. Columbia Pike, which served as the north boundary of Arlington Village, provided residents with easy access to public transportation and shopping. A shopping center serving Arlington Village residents was constructed along Columbia Pike, repeating the retail formula Ring implemented at Colonial Village. "Like its predecessors, this [Arlington Village] latest Ring project will be a complete community in itself."¹⁰

In Arlington County, numerous developers, regardless of their use of FHA-insured mortgages, embraced the influence of the Federal Housing Administration and its building principles on apartment developments. The continued success of FHA-insured projects, such as Colonial and Arlington Villages, proved the financial benefits of employing the methodology supported by the FHA. The continuing need of affordable, rental housing in Arlington County and the embracement of garden apartment complexes by the public was a successful formula to be repeated. The FHA's Large Scale Housing Division regulations and their effect on all housing constructed under the guidance of FHA-insured mortgages molded the garden apartment complexes developed in Arlington County.¹¹ These standards, while not specifically geared toward controlling architectural design, appear to have had a substantial influence on the overall design of Walter Reed Gardens. The garden apartment complex's use of building clusters, open courts, central entrances, and Colonial Revival design elements reveals the influence of the FHA's standards and principles.

The FHA standards addressed seven specific issues: community, neighborhood, site, buildings,

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dwelling units, services and cost. Regarding the community, FHA required that the area currently support a “number of diverse sources of income for the families to be served and that there exists a need for the type of development contemplated.” The FHA also required that the developers give “assurance[s] of continued harmonious land uses; [and] integration of the neighborhood and project.” The site was required to be free from adjacent topographic and industrial influences, conform to site characteristics and have a land coverage per acre, “for large-scale projects limited to 20-25%.”¹² One of Arlington County’s most favorable characteristics was its large tracts of land that had limited or non-existent development. In the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Arlington County, large swaths of land previously used for farming had begun to be subdivided in the 1930s and 1940s. Arlington Village, constructed in 1939, is sited on approximately fifty-three acres and is a planned community that incorporates recreational areas, open spaces, a community building and courtyards within five superblocks. This large development in Columbia Heights spurred smaller garden apartment complexes in the neighborhood including Walter Reed Gardens. Located along the west boundary of Arlington Village, Walter Reed Gardens was sited on the former land of Oscar C. Dresser. Dresser’s land, located at South 13th Street, South 16th Street and South Highland Street (South Walter Reed Drive), incorporated 8.6 acres of largely undeveloped land. Aura Tinkle, President of Walter Reed Gardens, Inc., and his wife Frances purchased the land from Dresser in January 1947 and sold it to Walter Reed Gardens, Inc. in September of that same year.

Arlington County was a testing ground for the FHA’s new programs and the early successes here spurred the repetition of the design of these garden apartment complexes across Arlington County and the nation. Walter Reed Gardens is an excellent example of the FHA’s influence on the small-scale garden apartment development in Arlington County.

Walter Reed Gardens, Post World War II, and Veterans’ Housing in Arlington: 1946-1949

The conclusion of World War II brought victory and peace to the United States and her allies, but the housing situation at home remained a priority for the government and local officials across the nation. The FHA and private developers turned their attention from fulfilling the

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needs of wartime workers to providing housing for the thousands of returning veterans. Section 608 of Title VI, which was used for Defense Housing during World War II, was re-enacted after the war to provide the veterans' emergency housing program. Immediately following the war's conclusion, the rate of development was strong and continued through 1948. The garden apartment complex at Walter Reed Gardens was originally designed with one-bedroom units in order to entice single veterans and childless couples in Arlington County. This apartment complex was similar in design and style to the individual low-rise apartments and smaller garden complexes being constructed during the later half of the 1940s throughout Arlington County.

Although the need for housing among returning veterans was the primary reason for the consistent demand for more housing in Arlington, the ushering in of the Cold War and the retention of large numbers of workers employed by the federal government exacerbated the problem. Arlington County officials, recognizing that the end of World War II would not relieve the pressure on the county, created a post-war planning committee in 1942. This committee aided in shaping Arlington County's planning for capital improvements and new developments in response to the anticipated jump in population.¹³ South Highland Street, now known as South Walter Reed Drive, was refurbished at the time of Walter Reed Gardens construction. During the same time, South 13th Road was extended west to meet South Walter Reed Drive, bisecting the Walter Reed Gardens complex.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Crandal Mackey, M.E. Church, and others, *A Brief History of Alexandria County, Virginia: Its Wealth and Resources, Great and Growing Industries, Educational and Social Advantages, Future Outlook Promising* (Falls Church, VA: The Newell Printing Company, 1907), p. 19.

² Rose, p. 176.

³ Rose, pp. 7-8, 172. The legislation passed in 1930 prohibits the appropriation of land from a county less than 30 square miles in area.

⁴ Gwendolyn Wright. *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1981. p. 195.

⁵ Goode. *Best Addresses*. p. 324.

⁶ "D.C. Building Activities Show Boom-Like Gains," *Evening Star*, December 28, 1935.

⁷ "Garden Apartments," *The Architectural Forum*, Volume 72, Number 5, May 1940, p. 309.

⁸ Federal Housing Administration. *The FHA Story in Summary: 1934-1959*. p. 2.

⁹ Federal Housing Administration. *The FHA Story in Summary: 1934-1959*. p. 2.

¹⁰ "The Way to Record Breaking Rents," *The Architectural Forum*, Volume 71, Number 2, August 1939, p. 135.

¹¹ "The Way to Record Breaking Rents," *The Architectural Forum*, Volume 71, Number 2, August 1939, p. 34.

¹² "Multiple Housing Under FHA: Government Housing Standards," *The Architectural Record*, Volume 84, Number 3, September 1938, p. 97.

¹³ Rose, pp. 225-226.